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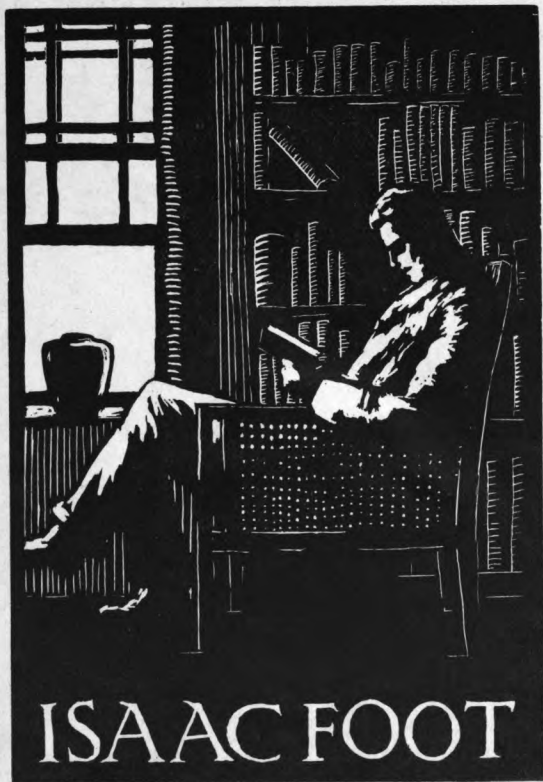
AIDS TO THE DEVOTIONAL  
STUDY OF SCRIPTURE

ELECTION  
AND SERVICE  
A. S. PEAKE, D.D.

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*Aids to the Devotional  
Study of Scripture*



*Aids to the Devotional Study of  
Scripture*

*By*

*A. S. Peake, D.D.*

*I*

*The Christian Race*

*II*

*Election and Service*

*III*

*Faded Myths*

*London : Hodder and Sloughton*

# *Election and Service*

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*Publishers London*

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## NATIONAL ELECTION





## CHAPTER I

### NATIONAL ELECTION

**I**T is a remarkable thing how recoil from a position carries men often into another extreme, which causes them to do less than justice to the truth enshrined in the opinion they reject. The Calvinistic controversy is a case in point. We have long passed away from those days of strenuous struggle marred by unseemly language and embittered by rancorous strife. If on the one side we may feel that it is neither beautiful nor edifying to watch good men seeking to surpass each other in the violence of their vituperation, yet we ought not to forget how keenly they were alive to the momentous issues round which the contest raged. It was no mean quarrel in which they were engaged, but their thoughts were

centred on the sublimest questions that can kindle the imagination or tax the strength of the human mind. They pushed their way boldly into the inmost secrets of God's counsel and speculated with no lack of courage on the plan He had formed before the foundation of the world. They built massive logical systems, grand and impressive ice-houses, to the glory of God. But the warm breath of a new spirit came over the world and the grim fortress, whose rigour had braced many with splendid courage and frozen the more sensitive to despair, began to thaw. The old controversies no longer fill our ears, and most of us would flatly refuse to recognise that a Being who could act on the principles once attributed to Him would be worthy of the name of a God at all. A Being who was most deeply concerned for His own glory, an Almighty Egoist, who, before the foundation of the world, selected some of His own creatures for eternal torment and did so irrespective of their own character, in order to illustrate His sovereign freedom, which could be conditioned by no act of man, would be no better than a monster.

Never again, let us hope, will the human spirit be darkened by the shadow of that awful spectre seated on the throne of the universe. We have recovered the Gospel of God's universal Fatherhood and His indiscriminating love. We proclaim to all the joyful tidings that their will to accept salvation is fettered by no arbitrary decree and limited by no reluctance on the part of God. We tell every man, even the most degraded, that God's love streams out to Him in a yearning as passionate as if there were no creature in the world beside him. Nay, even though an angel from heaven were to tell us the opposite we should not believe him, with such conviction do we hold the truth of God's love.

This is a transformation for which we cannot be too thankful. Yet, like most movements of revulsion, it is not unmingled good. It is well that we have parted with the thought of God which filled the lives of many with such excruciating terror, and drove others into reckless sin ; but it is not wholly gain to have replaced Him by a good-natured and amiable Deity, who cures all diseases with rose-water because He has

no heart to use the cautery or the knife. And there has been a corresponding relaxation in the moral fibre of men. Calvinism at least made bone, and it put iron in the blood; under its stern regimen there was little room for moral anæmia.

Still, it is not on this side of the case that I wish to linger. The recoil of which I have spoken is displayed in the neglect to speak of the subject of election at all. Now, no preaching that ignores election can do justice to the teaching of the Bible. There is much that is said about it in Scripture, and if all this is omitted it is a mutilated Gospel which we shall present. Paul, in particular, lays great stress upon the thought, but it goes back to a much earlier stage of revelation. When Amos uttered God's stern warning to Israel, "You only have I known of all the nations of the earth, therefore I will visit upon you all your iniquities," he and his hearers had at least common ground in their belief that Yahweh had selected Israel to be His own people. It is true that they wholly misconceived what was implied in that election. They argued, God has chosen us to be His people, therefore we

are His favourites, and He will support us in all our difficulties, irrespective of all moral considerations. We have only to do our part in gorgeous ritual and costly sacrifices, and He will do His part in vindicating us against all our foes. This was the besetting weakness of Israel from first to last. Its election God had intended as a means, but the Israelites took it to be an end in itself. For them election meant favouritism, the privileges accorded by an indulgent father to a petted child; and on the other side it meant the exclusion of the other nations from God's fatherly regard. Amos, on the contrary, told his infatuated listeners that they were foolish to long for the Day of Yahweh to dawn. It would dawn, indeed, sooner than they wished, but it would dawn in darkness and set in irretrievable doom. For election implied not favouritism, but a severer moral demand. Because they had been chosen from all the other nations more was expected of them, and their failure to respond would be visited with heavier punishment. And so down to the time when John the Baptist had to warn his countrymen not to rely on

their descent from Abraham, as if that guaranteed their immunity from disaster, they always clung to this misconception which flattered their racial pride. Indeed, even the great prophets failed to emancipate themselves completely from this misapprehension, with the exception, perhaps, of Jeremiah and the author of the Book of Jonah. The Second Isaiah, for example, sets Israel before us as elected for a special mission, namely, to reveal the true God to the whole world. Yet even he has not risen above the view that Israel is God's favourite people. It was, of course, natural that this should be so. The religion of Israel was from the outset a national religion. It rested on two pillars: Yahweh has chosen Israel to be His people, and Israel has chosen Yahweh to be its God. The religious and the patriotic were thus inseparably associated from the first, and these two elemental instincts co-operated in building up the nation and the religion. But it is plain that a religion which in its very essence was so penetrated with the national idea could hardly hope to surmount the racial limitation. Hence it is not

surprising that after the Jews had carried forward the standard of religion to a point it had not reached before, they should make the great refusal when the time came for the national religion to give place to the universal, and the spiritual leadership of the race should pass over to the Gentiles.

When we look abroad over the field of history it is plain how large a part has been played by this principle of election. It has become a commonplace that God elected Greece to educate the world, and Rome to teach it law and order, just as Israel was chosen to teach it religion. And if we cast our glance further we can see how in their own spheres Babylonia and Egypt were also elected nations. When we think of the mighty part in human history which was played by Babylonia at a time when we should, till a few years ago, have thought that history had not dawned, we realise that it, as much as Greece and Rome, had a divinely appointed task to fulfil in the education of the world. But the career of Israel presents the most impressive example, and it will be well to speak of this before I pass to the case of the individual.



The Old Testament shows us how God continually worked by the method of election as He moved steadily forward to the fulfilment of His great design of revealing Himself to the world in Christ. He chooses first of all the Semitic peoples, and from them He selects the seed of Abraham. Yet it is not to all His children that the mission is entrusted, but "in Isaac shall thy seed be called." In other words, when we look at Abraham's function in universal history it is only along one line of the Abrahamic stock that descent from Abraham is reckoned. Of Isaac's two sons one alone is chosen. It strikes us, indeed, as strange when we read the story of Jacob and Esau, of Esau the frank, impulsive, generous, magnanimous man, and of Jacob the double-dealing, close-fisted man who took advantage of his brother's hunger, who haggled with Laban and drove a bargain with God Himself, that Jacob should be chosen and Esau should be rejected. And yet it is not so wonderful after all. If I may quote what I have written elsewhere my meaning may be plain : "Esau was a man with no depth of nature and with no outlook into the eternal. He was not a

man of faith who postpones present gratification for future good, but one who lived like an animal, 'tame in earth's paddock as her prize,' with no spiritual horizon. He was thus, engaging though he might be, a character of less promise than his selfish, calculating, cold-blooded brother, who had spiritual vision and numbered Bethel and Peniel among his experiences. The contrast comes out in Esau's selling his birthright, and all its spiritual privileges, in a fit of impatient hunger, and Jacob's grim tenacity in holding on to the angel with dislocated thigh, till he blessed him." <sup>1</sup> But even within the race of Jacob the principle of selection was again at work. Here also it is at first sight surprising that the Northern kingdom, which was ultimately rejected, seemed to have more promise in it even from a religious point of view than the Southern. The Northern kingdom was not only larger, but life in it was fuller, richer, and deeper. Its territory was more fertile, the standard of living was probably higher, agriculture and commerce had larger opportunities. But even when we look away from material

<sup>1</sup> "Hebrews" in the "Century Bible," p. 230.

conditions and think of religion, the advantage seems to lie with the Northern kingdom. It was the home of many famous sanctuaries, where a costly and elaborate worship was carried on. This, it is true, does not prove a lofty spirituality, but there were other movements that suggest this. The great prophets belonged at first to the Northern kingdom. It was in Israel that Elijah and Micaiah worked; it was to Israel and not to his own people that the Judæan Amos was sent; it was in Israel that the broken-hearted Hosea proclaimed the message of God's untiring love.

Meanwhile the voice of prophecy was all but silent in Judah. We need not, however, too hastily infer from this that there was greater religious depth in Israel than in the Southern kingdom. Probably over a large part of this period the moral perils of the former were the greater. There was not the same degree of luxury, with its attendant corruption, in its poorer neighbour. Neither was there such a religious peril as threatened the kingdom of Ahab, when, as a consequence of his alliance with Tyre, the Baal of that state was placed side by side with

Yahweh for Israel's allegiance. The cult of the Tyrian Baal never struck its roots in Judah as it had done in Israel. If prophecy was a later appearance in one than in the other that was due not to poverty in religion, but rather to the absence of the perils which evoked it in the Northern. But there is a further reason. The prophet was one who had realised before others that great events were about to happen. He had the gift of seeing on the horizon the little cloud no larger than a man's hand, and to realise its significance as a presage of the future. Politically speaking, the Southern kingdom, largely in virtue of its geographical position, lay more remote from the main track of things, and offered a less tempting prey to the conqueror. There was not, therefore, the same need for a prophet to appear with the message to his countrymen that some mighty revolution was impending. All these considerations have to be taken into account when we raise the question why it was that the higher religion seemed to have its seat in Israel at first rather than in Judah. The fact in any case remains, that in the working out of the elective principle it was the

Southern, and not the Northern, people which was finally entrusted with the task. When the twenty years of anarchy that succeeded the death of Jeroboam II. culminated with the destruction of Samaria in 722, the Northern tribes ceased to be a factor in the world's history, election had passed them by. When we realise what election really meant, we shall not be the victims of the fancy that these tribes still maintain their distinct existence somewhere on the surface of our planet, and are yet destined to play a great part in the history of the world. It would be as futile to contend that because God had chosen Abraham, therefore Ishmael, as well as Isaac, was an elect people, or, that because Isaac had been chosen, Esau as well as Jacob shared in the election. The same principle, which chose Isaac and Jacob and cast Ishmael and Esau aside, is at work once more in the rejection of the Northern tribes. They pass out of history at this point, and were, no doubt, quickly merged among the surrounding peoples. The meaning of their election lay simply in the function they exercised in universal history. Like the other elect nations, like Babylonia and Egypt, like

Greece and Rome, their election ended with the fulfilment of their task, they have no meaning henceforth for universal history. Election does not imply favouritism, otherwise we might yield to such vain imaginations as fill the thoughts of our Anglo-Israelites. As it is we may cheerfully recognise that with the fall of Samaria the election of Israel was narrowed down to that of the Southern kingdom.

And how wonderfully was this choice justified. Judah was pre-eminently the people of revelation. As we cast our glance down the history and think of the splendid roll-call of names which rise before us, and ponder all that they have meant for the religious history of the world, we can have no misgivings as to the wisdom of this election. Isaiah and Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Second Isaiah, the authors of Jonah and Daniel, of Job and Ecclesiastes, many a nameless law-giver, historian, and psalmist, the authors of Proverbs, and the many prophets who might still be enumerated, all remind us how colossal was the achievement of this tiny race. The religion had, it is true, reached a lofty height before the fall

of the Northern kingdom. It had achieved its great monotheistic doctrine that has been one of the chief contributions to the religion of the world. Amos had asserted that other nations as well as Israel were the objects of God's care, and had a part to play in His providential dealing with mankind. He had also bound up with his lofty monotheism an inflexible morality. And Hosea had proclaimed a morality as exacting as that of Amos, but he had supplied it with a more definitely religious basis. He had preached the truth of God's grace and love with a power and depth of feeling that has rarely been surpassed. They had both affirmed the worthlessness of all ritual divorced from righteousness, and anticipated the great saying of a later prophet that God's whole demand was that man should do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with his God.

But while the Northern prophets achieved so much, it was reserved for the great teachers of Judah to build the fabric of revelation still higher and spread it over a wider area. They developed more explicitly the doctrine of the unity of God and deduced from it the call of Israel to pro-



claim Him to the world. Starting from the Davidic monarchy they created the doctrine of the Messianic King. They read the past and the future of Israel in the light of its great mission to teach the Gentiles the true religion and bear upon it the burden of their sin. They formulated the doctrine of personal responsibility, and in the doctrine of the New Covenant took one of the greatest steps forward ever taken in the history of humanity by transforming religion from a relation between God and the State into a personal relation between God and the individual soul. They wrestled with the problem of human pain and taught us how, when we are baffled in our attempts to find an intellectual solution, we may soar above our difficulties into unclouded trust. They expressed the deepest emotions and loftiest aspirations of the human spirit in words that remain for us to-day as the classical expression of the soul's all but unutterable yearnings. Their large contribution to the world's stock has been by no means exhaustively described, yet to have done so much would constitute an imperishable claim on our gratitude.

That out of the tribe of revelation God's supreme revelation of Himself should spring is altogether in accordance with the fitness of things. All the more remarkable is it that a race so gifted refused to move forward at the call of Providence. The reason for this I have already indicated, but the matter is one of such interest that it will bear further elaboration. I have already said that the besetting weakness of the religion of Israel was its national character ; that while the Jews did not doubt their election they misunderstood the cause which had prompted it and the ends for which it was designed. God's choice of Israel had been dictated by the fact that it was a people endowed with a pre-eminent religious genius. I do not, of course, mean that the greatness of Israel's religion is to be accounted for exclusively or even mainly by this fact. I firmly believe that it can be accounted for only on the supposition that there was at work in it a wholly unique action of the Spirit of God. But the wisdom of God selected the instrument most fitted for His work, and while there was on the one side the Divine inspiration,

on the other there was the religious genius of the people to respond to the Spirit's action. The Jews had fancied that God chose them simply because they were His particular favourites. They nullified their monotheism by belief in a capricious deity capable of favouritism. And just as they had misconceived the cause, so also they mistook the end. The end of election had been the blessing of the world; the Jews imagined that it meant dominion over the world. Their golden age was the Messianic time when a king of the Davidic line, a mighty warrior, should crush the heathen beneath his power, rule them with a rod of iron, or shiver them like a potter's vessel. Their thoughts turned much more to the Old Testament Messianic prophecies than to such passages as the poems on the Servant of Yahweh, which struck the note of suffering and of death. And so the Jews of Christ's day in a disappointing present, chafed by the constant irritation of Rome's galling yoke, comforted their embittered hearts with wild, fanatical hopes and painted lurid pictures of the doom that awaited the oppressor. So fatal was their misunder-

standing of the national election. Hence the kingdom was taken from them and the religious leadership of the world passed from the Semitic to the Aryan peoples.

But the fact that the Jews rejected Jesus raised an acute problem for the early Church. The argument must have been pressed home on the Jewish Christians with tremendous power, that Jesus could not be the Messiah, otherwise theologian and ecclesiastic and saint would never have combined to send Him to the Cross, nor would the great bulk of the nation have refused to accept His claims. For if Jesus were the Messiah, then there arose the strange situation that the chosen people had rejected Him, and thus an intolerable contradiction between God and His people would emerge. The Crucifixion of the Messiah would then seem to imply their utter rejection by God. It is quite plain from the election chapters in Romans how severely Paul felt the pressure of this difficulty. He was all the more sensitive to it because of his intense patriotism. He bore about unceasing pain in his heart for his nation, a nation that pursued him with relentless hate. Yet he

cannot shut his eyes to the plain facts, hence he has to settle the question how God's choice of Israel is affected by Israel's rejection of the Messiah. He discusses the problem with remarkable ingenuity. He solves his problem along these lines. Before we assent to the statement that God's election has failed we must define our terms. What then are we to understand by Israel? The Israel which is chosen is not the whole nation that we know; there is an Israel within Israel. It is not physical descent, but spiritual affinity, that counts in this domain. Those who are the physical descendants of Abraham are not in virtue of this to be counted Abraham's seed. It is those who are born according to the promise, those who share the faith of Abraham who are his true children. But since this promise was centred on Christ, it is those who believe in Him who are truly its heirs. There had, even on the showing of the Old Testament itself, been a narrowing of the elect. The principle illustrated in the choice of Isaac and Jacob had been exemplified in the seven thousand, who had maintained their allegiance to

Israel's God in the days of Elijah and in the remnant which Isaiah said had been left them by the Lord of Hosts. Again and again the principle had been exemplified in history that the true Israel had consisted in a very small part of the nation which bore that honoured name. And it is with this true Israel, and not with the sinful, unbelieving nation, that the promise and the election are concerned. It might, as in the days of Elijah, number seven thousand ; it might, as in the days of Jeremiah, be all but narrowed to one ; but it was with that spiritual kernel of the people alone that election was concerned. The logic of the position really carries with it Paul's great principle, that from the true Israel the idea of nationality has completely fallen away. To Abraham's seed the believing Gentile did, and the unbelieving Jew did not, belong. Hence the whole Israel of God becomes for Paul identical with the Christian Church.

But while Paul is swept on to this conclusion, not simply by the current of his own argument, but by the depth of his conviction as to the call of the Gentiles, his heart will not suffer him to remain content

with it. The prospect that his own people whom he loved so passionately should cancel their own election by their rejection of Jesus is a thought that he simply cannot bear. He weaves their present blindness into God's great design, and reads its providential meaning in the light of the Gentile mission. A blindness has befallen Israel that they may make way for the Gentiles, but it is not to be for ever that they maintain their inflexible hardness of heart. When the fulness of the Gentiles has come in, the Jews will accept their Messiah. And as Paul thinks of all the part his people had played in God's great plan, he rises to the great conviction that if their rejection of Jesus had meant the salvation of the Gentiles, their acceptance of Him would bring the climax of the world's history. In spite of the argument by which Paul has demonstrated that physical descent counts for nothing in the spiritual realm, his heart will not let him acquiesce calmly in the conclusion, or let him slam the door on his yearning for the salvation of his people. He is irresistibly driven to the conviction that all Israel will ultimately be saved.





## **A PECULIAR PEOPLE**



## CHAPTER II

### A PECULIAR PEOPLE

**M**ANY readers of the English Bible imagine that Christians are to be distinguished from the world by oddities and eccentricities, and some of them bring ridicule on the Gospel by living up to what they regard as its demand in this respect. We must be "a peculiar people," they tell us, and by "peculiar" they understand that oddity in dress and behaviour is one of the marks by which a true Christian can be distinguished from the world. It has been quite common for Churches to create sumptuary laws; there must be a Christian way of doing the hair and a regulation coat. It would, indeed, be a sorry thing if the Gospel consisted of such tithing of mint, anise, and cummin as this. The outward

garb may, it is true, be an index to the inward disposition, and one would sooner look for the meek and quiet spirit with the unobtrusive dress and gentle demeanour than with tawdry colours and a vulgar deportment. But it is quite a mistake to suppose that the devil of pride is exorcised by studied attempts at simplicity in dress, still more that the flesh is mortified by aspirations after ugliness. It is well known that those who have most eschewed finery have often spent much thought and time on the precision with which their neatness could be most effectively displayed, while it was a subtle temptation which assailed those who succeeded in making frights of themselves to imagine that they were thereby proving their lack of conformity to the world. Such is the deceitfulness of sin, that if we crucify natural pride, unless we are very wary, we find that spiritual pride has risen in its place. The important point is not that we should differ from the world in dress, or disregard of the conventions of good society, but that our inward spirit should be unworldly, and thus we should prove ourselves to be of those whose citizenship

is on high. To advertise our religion to the world by the cut of our clothes is the modern version of making broad our phylacteries, and in both cases the weightier matters are in danger of being forgotten. If we can speak of such a thing as dressing to the glory of God, I should imagine that it would consist in treating the details of one's dress, within certain obvious limits, as a matter of no intrinsic concern at all. Of course peculiarities may be shown in other ways, but the chances are that the more eccentricities we exhibit the less complete and balanced is our Christianity.

Happily the New Testament Revisers have brought the true meaning home to the Bible student. We are "a people for God's own possession." That, of course, was intended by the old rendering, "We are a peculiar people," in the sense that we are peculiarly God's own, God's special possession and treasure. Our ordinary use of the word "peculiar," however, has led many to a false interpretation of the language of the Authorised Version. The truth conveyed is so precious and important that it is regrettable that so widespread

a misapprehension should have prevailed as to its meaning. When Peter says to his readers, "But ye are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession," he is, in a way that is characteristic of him, transferring to the Church of Christ the prerogatives of ancient Israel. These had been the terms used to express the privileges of the Hebrew nation. It was a people peculiarly God's own, set apart by Him to be His inheritance in a special sense. Deep down in the heart of Israel was written this conviction, that it belonged to God by God's own special choice as no other nation belonged to Him. That the belief had its perils history showed only too plainly, and Israel never learnt that God had conferred this signal honour upon it that through it a supreme blessing might come to the world. Hence its religion always remained national ; it refused to step down from its position of privilege when the time for privilege had passed, and Jesus brought a universal religion into the world. But while the belief had its perils, it was not without its conspicuous merits. It set forth a splendid ideal for the nation. It was

always with it as a warning and an incentive, a standard and a goal. To be God's peculiar people implied that they must be worthy of a calling so high and a destiny so great. It implied the strictest monotheism, for what room was there for another God to stand by the side of their own? It implied complete religious devotion to Him, a lofty morality and the fulfilment of His law. In the strength of that belief the prophets rebuked and comforted their people, championed the cause of the oppressed, pleaded for social and moral reform, painted their glowing pictures of the brilliant future. Inspired by that conviction, the Psalmists wrote those great and wonderful lyrics, sublime and majestic, or sweet and tender, which as we read them stir us to the very depths. The nation, as a whole, perhaps, remained on a lower plane, but God's choice of it was justified by such men as these.

The time came, however, when out of the national the universal religion was to be born, and now Church and State fell altogether asunder. It was not race or nationality that counted in the constitution



of the peculiar people, but it was the individual relation to the God who had chosen them for His own possession. The first thought implied in the description of the Church as a people for God's own possession is the high value God places upon the Church. He who is the Lord of the unnumbered worlds of space yet counts as a possession, in which He takes a singular delight, the Church which He has redeemed for Himself. He had planned it in the counsels of eternity, and to its creation and completion the whole course of history was made subservient. No cost was too great, no sacrifice too terrible to secure this consummation on which His heart was set. Its outward state may belie its intrinsic dignity and veil its essential meaning, even as the outward semblance of Jesus concealed the indwelling Divinity. And the Church's course has been marred by stains of worldliness and ambition, of bitterness and implacable hate, by sins against love and truth that would make one almost despair of its future. Still it is our trust that the God who shaped the conditions in which it grew, and who has set steadily before Him the achieve-

ment of His goal, will not ultimately let the Church, though sinning so deeply, fail of its attainment. But how great is the obligation imposed on Christian people ! It is those who compose the Church who make it what it is. The danger with many of us is not that we should overrate the idea of the Church, but that we should underrate it. There are communities which may seem to over-emphasise the idea of the Church, but where they do so the meaning of the Church is largely misconceived. We who believe that our thought of the Church is truer and more spiritual should not be the less but the more devoted to the Church on that account. If we could steep ourselves more in the great New Testament teaching on the Church, if we could live ourselves into the wonderful teaching of the Epistle to the Ephesians, how great would be the enrichment of our religious life ! There ought to rise before us the ideal of that august community which lived in God's mind and love in the far-away eternity, which was created by Jesus Christ who loved it and gave Himself for it and purchased it with His blood, that Church which is His Body

and His Bride and the Temple of the Holy Ghost. When these great thoughts have captivated us, our individualism, which we cannot surrender, will have received its necessary complement. We shall understand the appeal of the Catholic Church to the imagination and conscience of Christians. I do not mean the sectional and self-conscious type of Catholicism which is a contradiction in terms, and certainly when I speak of the Church I do not mean our own special section of it. That has its peculiar claims upon us, and where God has placed us, there, except for a worthy reason, it is well for us to remain. But parochialism and even nationalism in religion ought to be relegated to a secondary place. No doubt most of us best serve the Church universal by serving the special branch of it in which we are placed, but we are never to lose sight of the fact that the vast Catholic Church which is God's own peculiar people and the Body and the Bride of Christ, is that mighty organism which transcends all our sectarian limitations and demands next to its Master the first place in our thought and interest.

And yet, as I have said, we must not surrender our individualism. It is true that in a sense we may speak of the Church as the object of redemption, but this must not lead us to overlook the truth that redemption is not mediated to the individual through membership in the Church. That has been a blunder which has cost the Church itself dear, for it has led men to suppose that the vital thing for salvation is Church membership, and this has led to the neglect of the individual need for living contact with Christ Himself. Our motto must not be, "To Christ through the Church," but "Into the Church through Christ." The initial condition is the mystical union of the individual with Him through faith, and it is this that at once constitutes him a member of Christ's Church. No one who is in Christ can be really outside the Church, even though he be attached to no external organisation. And on the other hand one may be attached to a particular section of the Church by membership in it without being a member of Christ at all. To the true Catholic Church such members, whatever be their position, cannot possibly belong.

Our personal relationship to Christ ought then to be the matter of most concern for us ; if that is right, everything else follows of itself.

## **INDIVIDUAL ELECTION**



## CHAPTER III

### INDIVIDUAL ELECTION

**T**HE thought of election, as applied to nations, is very illuminating, and helps us to gain an ordered conception of God's government of the world. The aim of this national election is the service of humanity rather than the exaltation of the chosen people. It is also vital, as I have urged, that we should dwell upon the election of the Church. But we need to remember that the New Testament has much to say of individual election. My purpose in this chapter is not so much to linger on the theological difficulties that are raised by the doctrine, but rather to draw out some practical lessons.

We were chosen before the foundation of the world. Even in the distant eternity that



lies behind us we were present to the mind of God, the objects of His love, the creatures of His predestination. Long before we had begun to be, we lived to His thought, and even then He planned for us our high destiny. He had willed us to appear in certain circumstances, and at a certain point of time, had selected for us our race and our family, and determined the stage on which we should play our part. We are not, then, the creatures of accident—mere drops of spray flung into a brief individuality and relapsing into the ocean of existence from which we came. It is neither blind chance nor blind fate that controls our life, but with the wisest forethought our entrance into being and our sphere of service in the world were ordained for us. The world itself exists as a means to the accomplishment of God's great purpose in our election.

It is a wonderful thought that God, out of the tangle of human life, should constantly weave the beautiful and harmonious pattern of His own eternal design, taking up into it and subordinating to it the crossing, clashing, twisted threads of our individual

action. It might seem that a million chances would inevitably frustrate God's purpose. For while we are the creatures of destiny, we are not the creatures of fate. We have our limits, but within those limits we have a freedom of movement left us, and it might seem as though this freedom gave us the power constantly to thwart the will of God and mar the design that He weaves. But God's wisdom comes out in this—that He leaves us freedom and yet gets His own way. We may, and do, constantly take a line out of harmony with His will. No matter ; He bends rebellion to His purpose as easily as He bends obedience, and works all into His great world-plan. The illustration from chess, which has been put forward by a great psychologist, may help us here. If an inexperienced player is playing with a consummate master of the game it makes no difference to the final result, though every move made by the inexperienced player be other than what his adversary would anticipate. The latter works all his antagonist's moves into his plan of the game and reaches the inevitable victory. So God has set His great scheme of the world's history before

Him, and no human caprice can defeat His final purpose.

Our election, then, is no after-thought, but an end which God has set Himself steadily to realise. But our election is in Christ ; we are not chosen apart from Him. Everything that is implied in God's choice of us depends absolutely on Christ. It is a favourite thought of the Apostle Paul that the Christian is in Christ. He is so vitally united to Him that Christ's experiences of death, resurrection, and exaltation are repeated in the experience of the Christian. It is therefore what we should expect when the apostle tells us that we were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world. Christ is the first object of God's election, but the choice of Christ carries with it the choice of all who are one with Him. And this thought helps us to understand the reason for our election. The destiny which God has in store for us is that we should be conformed to the image of His Son. A choice made so long ago, and made by the supreme Lord of the universe, so tenaciously held and so completely carried into effect, can have no meaner goal than that. We are

chosen in Christ, and our union with Him guarantees that the streams of vital energy which thus flow into our exhausted spirits will carry us forward with irresistible power. It is a thought full of comfort and encouragement to us that our salvation depends on something other than ourselves—on God's strenuous will and on our union with Christ. It was not we who took the initiative, but God. We were not the first to choose Him, but He to choose us, and had He never chosen us we never could have chosen Him. Our salvation, then, does not rest simply on our own will ; it rests on the eternal purpose and will of God. If it was only with our own wayward and shifting wills that we held fast to God, our grip on Him would soon be loosened and we should fall away. What assures and steadies us is the tight hold that He keeps upon us. "Fear not, little flock, it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." We are Christ's sheep, and none can pluck us out of His hand. Hence the ringing confidence with which the apostle proclaims the great grounds of our assurance of salvation. There is nothing that can separate us from the love of Christ ; not

death, which sunders with its relentless hand earth's dearest bonds; not life, with its separations darker and more bitter even than those of death; not the angels themselves who excel in strength; not the present, with all the desperate conflicts in which it engages us; not the future, with all its vague uncertainties and its terrible possibilities—no powers in heaven above, or in hell's depths beneath, nor any other creature in all the vast spaces of God's illimitable universe. For Paul the strongest force in that whole universe is the love of God, a power which all the combined forces of creation will not avail to nullify. It is not our love to God that He means, that smoking, glimmering flame, but the hot and radiant fire which glows in God's heart towards us. It is in this love that we nestle and are safe.

But while our conformity to the image of God's Son is an end in itself, it is not the sole end of our election. We are chosen for service, "elect," as Peter reminds us, "unto obedience." Paul was a chosen vessel, but he was chosen that he might bear the name of Christ before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. And we are an elect

race, not simply for our own salvation, but that we may show forth the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvellous light. Woe to us if we repeat the old mistake of Israel and presume on God's electing love of us to wrap ourselves in selfish indifference to the world! We are chosen for some task—a task specially allotted to us which we are pre-eminently fitted to do. The task may seem trivial to us, or our powers may seem inadequate for anything but the humblest service, and this may tempt us to discontent, to fret against our limitations, and despise the heavenly call. It is not possible for us, however, to judge of these matters aright. The sphere that seems humble, and the work that we account as trivial, may if we only knew it, count for much in the reality of things. But whether much or little, our duty is to be faithful. It is a wonderful inspiration that the thought of our election brings us. If in face of all disappointment and difficulty we can say, "I am chosen by God for this work," then we rise above our misgivings with a buoyant sense of mastery, we must succeed because God has willed it. And yet

this confidence will fill us not with pride, but with humility. We shall be constantly warned of our inadequacy, even for very slight service apart from God. If called to high service our sense of deficiency will be keener still. And the thought of our own free will is the most solemn warning of all. We have a sacred trust which we may betray by wilful treason of our own. We cannot defeat God's ultimate purpose, but we may defeat His election of us by obstinate rejection of His call, and we may defeat His choice of us for service by refusing to do the appointed task.

## **SUPERFLUOUS MERIT**





## CHAPTER IV

### SUPERFLUOUS MERIT

**I**T is a penetrating saying of Rudolph Sohm in his Church History that the natural man is a Catholic. By this he means that Catholicism, using the term in its sectional sense, with its apparatus of works and merit, is flattering to the pride of the natural man who desires to be saved by his own efforts. "What must I *do* to obtain eternal life?" is the form that his inquiry after the pilgrim's way naturally takes. To earn salvation rather than to receive it as a gift, to achieve by toilsome endeavour rather than to accept of God's bounty, seems to him more in harmony with the worth which he attaches to himself. The one thing about which he is most sensitive and where his interests are

most vitally concerned is the assertion of his own value. When this is impugned it touches him on the raw. Hence he accepts with alacrity the idea that the performance of pious ceremonies and the fulfilment of certain tasks win for him salvation. He accordingly stores up his stock of merit and purchases by works his own salvation.

In the case of some it is at no ordinary kind of merit that the effort is aimed. These practise more difficult paths of self-righteousness, especially by austerities. We meet with closely allied phenomena in other religions. The ascetics of India have probably far outdone in their tortures anything inflicted by Catholics upon themselves. In their case, however, the austerities are in many instances designed to secure power. Whether it is power as with the Fakir of India, or merit as with the Catholic, it is fundamentally a self-regarding motive that lies at the root of action—though of the two the Catholic idea seems the preferable. By the asceticism he practises he seeks to create not simply a stock of merit adequate for his own need, but superfluous merit. This work of supererogation may be of

value for others who fall behind. The Church thus comes to have its treasury of merits built up by those who have done more than properly falls to their share. Thus it can equalise the distribution of merit, it can take from its treasure-house what will supply the deficiencies of the spiritually indigent and, if they cannot be saved by their own merits, save them through the merits of the saints. Their own righteousness may be filthy rags, but they can go to heaven in the cast-off clothes of those who have righteousness enough and to spare. And thus the souls in purgatory may be aided. Out of its resources of merit, accumulated by the pious, it is possible to help very largely the souls that might be condemned to a far longer period of cleansing if the fires of purgatory did their work unassisted.

It may help to illustrate the theme if I refer at this point to Anselm's theory of the Atonement as put forward in his *Cur Deus Homo* ? That theory has found much favour among orthodox Protestant theologians, but to my own mind it has always seemed vitiated by defects of the most

serious kind. Its whole conception of sin as an affront to the honour of a punctilious Deity, for which reparation must be made by something that did an honour to Him outweighing the dishonour done by sin, was natural to mediæval chivalry, but it suits neither our more enlightened conception nor the presentation in the New Testament. But leaving aside this, and leaving aside also the grotesque and fanciful elements in his theory, let us consider how, according to Anselm, the Atonement was actually achieved. Along speculative lines he reaches the necessity for a human Incarnation of the Son of God. It is necessary that honour should be done to God so vast as to cancel the dishonour done to Him by human sin. No being, who is less than divine, can achieve this stupenduous task, none but man can wipe out the insult wrought by man's sin, hence He who achieves the redemption must combine God and man in a single personality; and for reasons into which we need not enter Anselm reaches the conclusion that it is the Son of God, and not the Father or the Holy Spirit, who must be incarnate.

This, however, brings the Son of God within the category of creatures, and since the creature owes complete obedience to God it might seem as though even the Son of God had no honour to give His Father which did not lie within His duty and therefore carried with it no exceptional degree of merit. Anselm, however, argues that since Jesus was sinless He was not liable to the penalty of death. Inasmuch therefore as He died in consequence of His loyal adhesion to the will of God, He paid God an honour which it was not incumbent on Him to pay, and the worth of His person gave an incomparable value to His act. God could not allow so signal a mark of honour to Himself to go unrewarded. But since Christ required nothing for Himself He made over the stock of merit which He had thus achieved to mankind, and since this was of infinite value it easily outweighed all the sins of humanity so that man, who could not save himself, was saved by Christ.

It is easy to see that what lies at the root of the theory is a doctrine of superfluous merit. Jesus had not only done everything

that God could require of Him, but He had done more. His unshaken fidelity to the will of God had swept Him into the current which carried Him to death. He might, without blame, have refused to die, since death was the due of the sinner alone. But by doing an honour to God, and accepting a fate which He might justly have declined, He created a store of merit of unbounded value. This seems to me a profoundly irreligious presentation of the subject. In plain English it means that Jesus was better than He had any need to be. When we put it in this blunt way we feel at once that there must be something wrong in a theory which is built on such conceptions. When we look at it more closely the idea is also seen to be self-contradictory. For if we grant that inflexible loyalty to God's will inevitably brought Christ to His death, we cannot admit that there was any superfluous merit in the action. It was the duty of Jesus as the creature of God to adhere, without flinching, to the will of God, and accept all the issues that this involved. Accordingly Anselm would bring us to this position,

that inasmuch as Christ was sinless there was no obligation on Him to die, but inasmuch as death was inevitable as a result of His loyalty to God, there was an obligation on Him to die. Since, however, He could not have been free from the obligation and also bound by it, it is clear that Anselm's theory is vitiated by an internal inconsistency. We are, in fact on the wrong track altogether when we interpret the death of Christ through the theory of superfluous merit, and the irreligion seems to me as shocking as the logic is defective.

But the irreligion becomes much worse when we apply to others the same set of ideas. When we say with reference to people that they are better than there is any need for them to be, that they have done their share and more than can be required of them, we are forcibly reminded of the searching saying in the Gospel, "When ye shall have done all things that are commanded you, say we are unprofitable servants ; we have done that which it was our duty to do." Even when we have strained ourselves to the utmost, when our zeal has known no cooling and our labour



no remission, when we have put ourselves, with every ounce of strength that belongs to us, into our task, we have no room for boasting, we have simply done our plain duty. And how few there are, if any, who from this point of view could look back over their lives without self-reproach. With fields ripe unto harvest and the grain rotting in the ears because the reapers are so few, with pain that calls for alleviation, with misery which finds no one to comfort it, with sin that poisons life at its very springs, indifference and laziness are not pardonable weaknesses, they are criminal in no small degree. We need none of us be concerned lest we should do too much, we are none of us likely to commit that error. Of course I am speaking now of the total output which, conditioned as we are, can only be as full as we ought to make it by wise observance of the laws of health, and by sufficient rest to renew the wasted energies. Overwork in detail may lead, probably will lead, to a lessening of the total output. This is a matter for care and nice adjustment, and probably most of us blunder through life without finding how to get the utmost out of it.

And yet I do not like to put the matter in terms of duty, we are on the legalist level when we do so, and at the core of such a thought there lies a misconception of God. To live always in the great Taskmaster's eye is of course something far higher than most people have attained, but when we look at God just as the Taskmaster we are hirelings and not sons. We sweat in the brickfields under the lash of duty and bring in our tale of bricks and are glad that the day's work is done. But when we have sat at the feet of Jesus, and God has ceased to be the great Taskmaster and has become the Father who makes the utmost sacrifices for our welfare, a new spring in our being is touched and we do not stand bargaining with God for so much pay in return for so much work, but count all time lost that we do not spend in His service. Between Father and son there can be no thought of merit and duty, of exacting requirement and forced service. We adopt as our own the motto, "I delight to do Thy will, O my God," and the joy of the Lord that we supremely seek is the bliss of service lavished to the full limit of our power.



# **A LODGE IN THE WILDERNESS**



## CHAPTER V

### A LODGE IN THE WILDERNESS

**I**N one of his prophecies Jeremiah utters his desire that he might have in the wilderness a lodging-place of wayfaring men. It is not for a comfortable retreat that he asks, but for a desert khan, with bare walls and a roof where the traveller would just find a night's shelter, but bring his own supplies with him. This empty, comfortless retreat, which men on a journey might well put up with for a single night, he would welcome as a permanent abode. It was not that he hated his fellows, for his was a nature peculiarly formed for friendship and social intercourse. Nor was it that he had grown to dislike his country, for he was a patriot of the highest and rarest type. Indeed, it was just this quality of his

patriotism which might have filled him with bitterness. For he did not wish that his country should be rich or powerful, or even politically free, so intensely as he desired that it should be governed in the fear of God, with scrupulous justice and kindness between man and man. He set himself against the rushing stream of popular opinion, and risked the charge of treason by his counsel that Judah should submit to Babylon. Nor did his foes stop at insult; again and again they nearly compassed his death. It would not then have been wonderful for one so keenly sensitive to prefer the discomfort of a lodge in the wilderness to the derision and violence that assailed him in the city.

Yet in this passage it is not the mockery or ill-usage to which he is exposed that wrings this cry of longing from him. It is the sin of his people which makes him so sick at heart. He feels that life is poisoned by treachery and deceit. No one can be sure of his friend, the very foundations of confidence have been undermined. He would gladly be gone from a society so honey-combed with deceit. It is not strange that

a man like Jeremiah, of such splendid integrity and loyalty of spirit, should feel a moral nausea come over him as he looked at this loathsome spectacle. Better the desert, with all its privations and loneliness, than the blessings of civilisation with men's venomous slander and the betrayal of their brothers. There he could be alone with his God in the fresh, free life of the wilderness, away from the stifling atmosphere of the capital and the court. For such a nature as his, that cared little for external comfort, but found its supreme satisfaction in God, the life of the hermit's cell seemed to promise a haven of blessed peace. Yet, could Jeremiah have been happy in it? He could not have forgotten his people, and the moral leprosy which had filled him with loathing would soon have cried aloud to him for compassion and help. If the prophetic word was like an intolerable fire within his bones so that he could win no relief till the hot lava stream of passionate indignation had burst forth from his breast, how could he have been at ease in the wilderness when he thought of the sinners who were at ease in Zion? For those



volcanic fires of indignation were kindled by love as well as by righteousness, and he could not have wept for his people in voluntary exile while a chance remained that he might influence them by denunciation or appeal.

It is the temptation of many to succumb to a disgust with the world. The disgust may be of various kinds. It may be the shrinking of culture from ignorance, of refinement from coarseness or vulgarity, of aristocracy from the mob, of society's curled and scented darlings from the great unwashed, of purity from vice. Some of these forms of repulsion are more noble than others, yet we must beware lest even the best of them carry us too far. I wish specially to speak of the danger to which highly developed religious natures are most prone. Their lodge in the wilderness is often built on the Mount of Transfiguration, they cultivate the society of the spiritual *élite*, and their life is apt to pass in religious rapture. Now, to be on the Mount with Jesus and see Him transfigured before our eyes, to watch other religious leaders pay their homage and pass away leaving Him in

unique and unapproachable splendour, to hear the Divine voice of attestation to Him, these are experiences we may all covet, for they have their place and value in our pilgrimage. Yet they are only anticipations of our goal, and therefore can come to us but at rare moments. Our permanent place while life lasts is not on the Mount of Transfiguration, but at its foot, with the crowd and the demoniac, the heart-broken father and the disciples of little faith. Religion is not to be cherished by us as a soft and luxurious emotion ; it misses much of its purpose with us unless its fires cleanse us of self-seeking. The vision and the assurance, the strength for service and the central glow are not to be cherished as selfish enjoyments, but lavished on the spiritually needy. If we hoard these things we lose them ; the joy and blessedness they bring to ourselves are doubled if we share them with others.

Now, it is a praiseworthy instinct which leads many to keep aloof from the evil lest they should be contaminated by it. It is not good for us to become too familiar with vice, lest we should become depraved by it

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and the fine sensibilities of the spirit should lose their delicacy of touch. Yet it has been proved over and over again that it is quite possible for the beautiful spiritual character to become stronger and more beautiful when engaged in the work of rescue among the criminal and the vicious. In this connexion Browning's splendid lines on Dante in "Sordello" occur to me :—

"Dante, pacer of the shore  
Where gluttoned hell disgorgeth filthiest gloom,  
Unbitten by its whirring sulphur-spume—  
Or whence the grieved and obscure waters slope  
Into a darkness quieted by hope ;  
Plucker of amaranths grown beneath God's eye  
In gracious twilights where His chosen lie."

It is quite possible that some who read my words may have to tread the circles of human sin as Dante trod the nine circles of hell, and yet remain "unbitten by its whirring sulphur-spume." For this they need a pure heart and constant fellowship with God, and a freedom from anxious care. They need the courage of the doctor that sends him into the fever-stricken district, and renders him immune from infection

because he is not nervously seeking to guard himself against it. We have not to be thinking with morbid preoccupation too much of keeping ourselves from stain ; we must walk fearless amid the contagion of the world's evil, armed against it by a buoyant trust in God, with hearts set on healing its diseases and soothing its pain. Our place is not in the hermitage or the cell, but where God has set us in the full tide of life, not anxious to gather our garments about us that none of the world's mire may be spattered upon them, but moving in the thick of the traffic to raise the fallen and bind up the broken limbs.

The Christian is often tempted to flee not only from the world's wickedness, but from the strife of tongues. Nor can we wonder at it. Milton satirises the predestination controversies of his time by representing them as the congenial occupation of devils with a taste for metaphysics. It is painful in the extreme to read the old controversies of Christians with each other, the ferocity and malignity with which they conducted them being so wholly unworthy of the name they bore and the ties of

brotherhood that should have been deeper than all division. It is not wonderful that people who are aware of these things, and wish to keep themselves free from unholy tempers, and all the mutual exasperation which they bring, should resolve once and for all to renounce religious controversy. The slope that shoots controversialists to the precipice is so fatally easy. They begin with the best motives, a deep sense of the value of truth and the danger of error, a zeal for God, an affectionate concern for the soul of their brother, which they feel to be in peril, as well as for the souls of those who are likely to follow in his train. But as the controversy proceeds their tone changes. They are stung by some cavalier phrase, provoked by misunderstanding, irritated by the stupidity which will not see what is to themselves so plain, tempted to dwell more and more on the dark and perilous sides of the error they are exposing. They begin to trace intellectual errors to moral obliquity; the tone becomes spiteful, then embittered, then positively venomous. And so Christian brotherly love becomes the scoff of the

cynic, while it rouses the honest disgust of those who make no profession of religion at all.

Yet here again we must not let ourselves be driven back by fear of this real danger. We naturally dread lest controversy should coarsen and deprave us and be a foe to the refined spiritual life. Yet the interests of truth are precious, and we must take our share in the strife. Truth's interests are often served by frank discussion. The divine spark is struck out in the collision of mind with mind. There is no need why any of us should shrink from conflict with what is confessedly the base and false, for in battling with that we are not likely to compromise any qualities which we ought to cherish. It is the battle between brothers that needs to be so carefully watched. There is a phrase of Tacitus, the Roman historian, that master of mordant and incisive phrases, which sometimes comes back to me as I think of these things. He speaks of a hatred deeper than that of brothers. Tacitus sometimes exhibits an appalling insight into the possibilities of human nature. And as we

ponder the terrible story of religious controversy and see how brothers spring madly at each other's throats we are tempted to turn away from it as an evil thing. Yet what are we Christians for if not to conduct ourselves as Christians? To put the best construction on the language and motives of our opponents, to seek to place ourselves at their point of view, patiently to try to understand them, to prevent misunderstanding of our own position on their part and to clear it away when it has arisen, to be courteous, to be sympathetic, to keep ourselves free even under exasperation from violent language, not to lose our temper; these are the elements of Christian controversy. Two great personalities in the early Christian Church come into my mind as illustrations of the two methods. Polycarp is in many ways an attractive figure. He had, it is true, no intellectual distinction, his mind was thoroughly commonplace. He had no originality so far as we can see and simply handed on to his successors what he had himself been taught. But he won the admiration of the Church by the splendid integrity of his life, and the

story of his martyrdom remains beautiful and impressive for all time. Yet I can never think of Polycarp without regret for the way in which he treated Marcion. No doubt Marcion's views did not harmonise with the apostolic faith, but it is very regrettable that when he met Polycarp in Rome, and asked for recognition, he should have received the reply, "I recognise the first-born of Satan." What a contrast to Polycarp's narrowness is presented to us by Origen ! His heroism in times of persecution was as illustrious as that of Polycarp. He was a man of an integrity as solid and a spirit even more beautiful. In learning, in genius, in intellectual grasp and speculative power he has had few to rival him in the history of the Church. We learn how on two occasions he came into contact with those who had fallen into error, but instead of saluting them as the devil's first-born, or loading them with such foul abuse as disfigures the pages of Jerome, he met them in conference, patiently listened to their arguments, and by the cogency of his reasoning brought them back to the truth. We, too, must learn the lesson that it is for us to



win by persuasion rather than to bludgeon by violence.

Once more, monasticism has in its varied forms been fostered by this desire for a lodge in the wilderness. Life in the world has seemed to be incompatible with life in the Spirit. To be a good Christian you must be a monk: such was the logic of the Catholic position. Of course this involved that the vast majority of Church members were called to be only indifferent Christians, since the monastic life was obviously an unattainable ideal. I remember when I was a schoolboy that my class-leader said on one occasion that he did not see how the world would get on if we were all Roman Catholics. Naturally I could not catch the point of his remark, but it was explained to me that if we were all monks and nuns the world would soon come to an end. History was probably not one of the good man's strong points, but one would have thought that observation would have made clear to him that only a small proportion of Catholics took vows of celibacy. Yet he perhaps said a better thing than he knew, for the logic of the

ideal is, I think, that if we were all Roman Catholics of the best type we should "go into religion," as they phrase it, and become monks and nuns. The phrase "go into religion" is itself significant in this connexion, as if a man could not be religious in the fullest sense of the term without spending his days in a cloister. It reminds one of the odious phrase, "to go into the Church," meaning to become a minister, as if the unordained person were not in the Church already.

The Reformation did much for us, on which I need not linger at this moment, but one great service it rendered us was to sweep away entirely this false religious ideal. Luther and Zwingli alike insisted that the Christian's place was in the world. They emphasised the sanctity of common life and ordinary duty, and taught that a man fulfilled the will of God as much by devoting himself to business, professional or artisan life, as if he entered into the ministry. And Luther knew monasticism from the inside; he had sought peace of mind along that line, and utterly failed to secure it. All the ingenious ways of self-

righteousness that the Church had devised had been tried, and tried in vain. For if we cut ourselves adrift from the world, yet we cannot find release from ourselves, and even from the world we cannot be really adrift, for into the loneliest lodge in the wilderness we carry the world in our heart. It is not by austerities, by isolation, by rigorous asceticism that we win our freedom from evil. It is not to a life starved and stunted, anæmic and self-centred that we are called, but to a life large and rich, far-reaching and sympathetic—a life of tolerance and magnanimity, of high courage and strenuous service.

**BUT FEW THINGS ARE NEEDFUL,  
OR ONE**



## CHAPTER VI

### BUT FEW THINGS ARE NEEDFUL, OR ONE

**I**T is probable that the identification of the Mary and Martha of whom we read in Luke with the Mary and Martha of Bethany, the sisters of Lazarus, of whom we read in John is correct. And that not only on account of the coincidence of the names, but on account of the correspondence in character. It is true that Luke does not give the name of the village in which they resided, but it is quite in his manner to speak in this indefinite way of places, as he does in many instances of persons. And it is probably to this rather than to any fear that the mention of the residence of the two sisters might bring trouble upon them that we are to ascribe the omission of any reference to Bethany. Few texts are more fre-

quently quoted than the text, "But one thing is needful"—in fact, "the one thing needful" has passed into a proverb. Not only, however, is the meaning commonly misunderstood, but the reading is incorrect. According to the best manuscripts Jesus did not say, "But one thing is needful." He said, "But few things are needful, or one." The Revisers give this in their margin, but probably their timidity or their desire not to disturb old associations prompted them to leave the incorrect reading in the text. One may have a kind of respect towards this tenderness for sentiment, but, after all, it is very much more important for us to know what Jesus said than to retain a favourite but inaccurate rendering of what He said. The claims of truth override those of sentiment. And as it often happens, the true text, even though at first sight it displeases us by its unfamiliarity, turns out, when we come to look into it, to contain a deeper and richer meaning. So with the true text before us, it is very instructive to get at the real meaning of Jesus in this passage.

In His journeys Jesus had come to

Bethany, and was welcomed with warm hospitality by Martha. Martha was just a good housewife, busy, energetic, commonplace. She was deeply attached to Jesus, and there was nothing too good to set before the Rabbi. And therefore she was anxious and disturbed about much serving. But while she bustled about the house her sister Mary sat at the feet of Jesus and listened to His words. Martha was a homely soul who had no patience with the quiet, meditative type. It is not unlikely that she was tempted to despise the brooding Mary as a dreamy, unpractical creature, hardly equal to the demands of this practical work-a-day world. Shallow and unimaginative, she had no comprehension of the depths within her sister's nature, contemptuous with the contempt of those who do not and cannot understand. It was bad enough that her sister should be so incapable on ordinary occasions, but it was quite intolerable now that they had the chance of honouring Jesus. There was so much to do, such a feast to be prepared, that now, if ever, was the time to show her devotion to the Master. And instead of



that she was lazily sitting at His feet and listening to His word. We can well imagine the signs of the rising storm, the banging of the door, the clattering of the dishes, the loud voice, the angry glances at her serenely unconscious sister. As the time wore on and the task became more urgent, her sense of injury grew greater and still hotter her indignation that her sister should leave her in the lurch. And at last she could stand it no longer, and how much she was thrown off her normal balance is clear from the fact that she actually so far forgot herself as to blame Jesus that He should let Mary thus waste her time listening to Him instead of setting her to do something useful.

It is beautiful to watch how Jesus deals with her. He does not sternly put her in her place, or rebuke her for the tone she has adopted towards Him. He recognises that she is a poor flustered soul in a tired body, and so His mode of address to her is tender—one might even say affectionate. And with gentle but unerring hand He strikes to the root of the mischief. Few things are more common than to observe the

complete lack of proportion with which people dwell on their grievances. Even had Martha's reproach been justified, it was nothing so serious that she should get into a passion over it. But it is the bane of so many people that wrongs done to others seem to them quite trivial, while all their cool judgment leaves them the moment these wrongs are perpetrated on themselves. In a large number of cases the injuries are not only trivial, but purely fanciful. Yet they are quite sufficient to distort one's whole view while they remain the medium through which one looks. Jesus gently reminds Martha that all this fuss is quite unnecessary. She is distracted about many things, but few dishes, and these the simplest, will amply suffice for His physical need. Had she only understood Him better, the simple preparations could soon have been made, and she, too, might have been sitting with her sister at the Saviour's feet.

"But few things are needful," Jesus said, referring to the meal they were about to share. And then He adds, striking a deeper note, "or one." It is, however, obviously

a mistake to suppose that the one thing needful of which He thought was, as it is often taken, the blessing of personal salvation. For this would imply that Mary had chosen it while Martha had neglected it. But that surely cannot be the contrast intended. We are not to suppose that Martha had rejected this blessing. She, too, was devoted to Christ as really as Mary, though with less comprehension. Moreover, the common interpretation misses altogether the main point. If we ask, Needful for whom? the answer in this context can only be Needful for Jesus. Martha thought that many things were needful for Jesus, and therefore she was cumbered with much serving. Jesus meets this by telling her that His requirements are few and simple. The "many things" and the "few things" were both for Jesus, so that the "one thing" must also be for Jesus. We can accordingly now understand what it was that Jesus meant when He added the words "or one." There are few things that I really want to satisfy My physical hunger. Yes, but I have a deeper hunger than the hunger for physical com-

fort, which is all that Martha understands or provides for, and it is that hunger which Mary has satisfied. By sitting and listening to the words of Jesus she responded to a need deeper even than the need for food.

Now when we consider the lot of Jesus it is not difficult for us to understand what He meant. What was it for which He craved with a hunger greater even than for food? We remember how when His disciples returned from the Samaritan city and asked Him to eat He replied that He had meat to eat of which they knew nothing. He had just been seeking to save the lost, and in the woman of Samaria He saw the promise of a rich harvest. And the sense of exhilaration which had just come to Him had refreshed the weary body that had been too tired to accompany the disciples into the city and so thirsty that He had asked the woman to draw Him water from the well. To find one who would hearken to His message, that was for Him a glad experience. But we may believe that there was a reason even deeper for the high praise He accorded to Mary. The reader of the Gospel must often have pondered on the loneliness of Jesus •

during those months which culminated in the dark deed of Calvary. Over and over again we have it impressed upon us how impatient the disciples were of all allusions to the fate which was to overtake Him. Perhaps impatience is the wrong word ; they simply could not enter into the thoughts of Jesus. They were ambitious and self-centred, their thoughts dwelt eagerly on wealth and glory and power. The anticipation of the throne shut out the apprehension of the Cross. And thus Jesus when He most needed human sympathy was denied it by His uncomprehending apostles. Even the most commonplace long to be understood ; they would fain disclose the sacred confidence to one who can sympathise. They do not feel that their friends have done the most important thing for them when they have ministered to their physical comfort. The overburdened soul yearns to share its trouble with a sympathetic spirit. And how much more was this so in the case of Jesus ! We are perhaps tempted to be envious of the great spirits of our race, but we forget the tragedy of isolation to which their very greatness dooms them. And Jesus more than any had

to endure this penalty of lonely greatness. Where He can catch a flash of sympathetic insight, as with the Syrophœnician woman, or Peter at Cæsarea, one may note the peculiar thrill and sudden glow of emotion with which He welcomes it. And in Mary He had found a heart that responded to His own. We learn how later she came and anointed Him beforehand for the burying. There were two who penetrated the purpose of Jesus—Mary with the insight of love and Judas with the insight of hate.

And so Mary had ministered the one thing of which Christ stood most in need. She had served Him better than Martha for all Martha's diligent activity, and she had served Him in a more permanent way. The food that restores the body's energy perishes in the act of use, and the service itself is thus of the most fleeting character. But the good part which Mary had chosen, the quiet listening while Jesus eased the burden of His spirit, that was something which could not be taken from her, it remained a permanent possession. It is not activity in itself, but misdirected activity, or an activity too narrowly interpreted of which we must beware.

## 86 BUT FEW THINGS ARE NEEDFUL

We cannot do too much for Christ, but we may easily serve Him with all our power in trivial or useless ways, when the willingness to sit at His feet and listen to His word might give us a clearer conception of His purpose, and turn our activity into the most fruitful channels. Even now what Christ prizes is the heart in perfect sympathy with His own, not simply the loving, but also the wise and the understanding heart.

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